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ABSTRACT

Concerned with imprecision in researchers' use of the word, "interpretive," this report draws from the work of Max Weber to describe the characteristics of an interpretive science of organizational communication and then briefly lists some advantages of following the interpretive approach. First examining the role of subjective meaning in organizational communication, the report suggests that actors' subjective meaning must take into account the behavior of others. It then defines two types of researcher understanding--observational and explanatory--and presents obstacles to understanding created by problems in interpreting actors' motivations. Referring to Weber, it states that an interpretive science must set forth statistical probabilities if it is to have causally adequate explanations, but that statistical probabilities yield nothing more than incomprehensive regularity unless they are accompanied by an interpretive understanding of actors' subjective meaning. The report then briefly cites two examples of incomprehensive regularity in interpersonal communication and network analysis research. Finally, the report presents the major advantages of the interpretive approach: it keeps researchers meaning centered, helps them avoid the compilation of sterile and incomprehensible regularities, and allows them to rise above observational understanding and achieve explanatory understanding. (MM)

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ON THE DESIRABILITY OF AN INTERPRETIVE SCIENCE OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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ON THE DESIRABILITY OF AN INTERPRETIVE SCIENCE OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Although our program title speaks of interpretive approaches to organizational communication, I shall make a case for one approach and hope that this can serve as a platform broad and strong enough to support my colleagues and their papers. The motivation for stressing one approach is a reaction to the wide currency the word interpretive has recently come to enjoy. We have now had three conferences on Interpretive Approaches to Organizational Communication at Alta, Utah. Emanating from the first of these conferences was a book, Communication and Organizations: An Interpretive Approach.[1] And, of course, we have this SCA convention program on interpretive approaches to organizational communication.

After listening carefully I have come to the conclusion that this new word interpretive is often being used in a most imprecise way. That conclusion is reinforced in conversation with researchers who have recently come to embrace these approaches. Some use the term, for example, to signify that the researcher interprets phenomena. Upon reflection, however, it is clear that all scholars and researchers interpret something, whether it be an artifact, a datum, a behavior or a poem. Some use the word in a negative way -- as in the interpretive approach is anti-positivistic, even anti-quantitative. Such a negative self-limitation would be fatal. All areas of inquiry must have methods of verification and rejection; numbers sometimes provide an economical way of summarizing the "stuff" used to verify and reject. What bothers me most about the imprecise use of interpretive is the attitude of license communicated by some speakers and writers, a sense of relief that one can be free and easy in pursuring the interpretive approach.

My purpose today is to show that the interpretive approach is neither new nor free nor easy. My paper has two parts. The first part defines, following Weber, what an interpretive science of organizational communication ought to look like. The second part sets forth some advantages that should accrue to researchers following the interpretive approach.

I

My definition of interpretive organizational communication follows the "methodological foundations" of Max Weber, Economy and Society.[2] Notice the sub-title, An Outline of Interpretive Sociology, for confirmation that the approach is not new -- even though it has been widely misunderstood and misinterpreted.

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The sine qua non of an interpretive organizational communication is a concern with the subjective meaning an organizational actor attaches to his or her communicative actions; to qualify as organizational communication the subjective meaning of the actor would have to take into account the behavior of others. The actor's meaning is of two kinds. The first in the actual existing meaning of an individual or group; the second is a theoreticialy conceived ideal type of meaning attributed to an actor or group of actors.

Contrary to the past practice of most sociologists, Weber intended that several ideal types (e.g., traditional, rational-legal or bureaucratic, and charismatic ideal types of legitimate authority) be applied to the same concrete action. This allows the researcher to deconstruct the concrete action toward an understanding of its intertangled complexity. This, in modern research parlance, allows the researcher to enjoy "degrees of freedom" in a single case study.[3] The so-called "rationalist" bias of Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy can thus be seen as a bias in method. By applying a rationalistic ideal type to an organization one can observe deviations. These deviations are made clear by a simultaneous comparison to, say, the traditional or charismatic models, or to a new ideal type theoretically conceived by the researcher in order to make the deviations even sharper in focus.

The researcher's understanding, or Verstehen, of the actor's subjective meaning can be described at two levels. The first is the observational understanding. I observe a woman at her desk adding the figures 943 + 878 and reaching the sum of 1,821. I have an observational understanding of her subjective meaning. If I ask her what she is doing and she replies that she is an accountant balancing the books for the Vice President, I now have an explanatory understanding because the act is placed in an intelligible motivational context of meaning. The researcher must get inside the skin of the actor.

The researcher's understanding or interpretation aims at clarity and certainty. Three principal obstacles stand in the way. The first is the problem of unconscious motives. The researcher must try to describe and analyze these motives even if they are not a part of the conscious intention of the actor. This does become, however, a borderline case of interpretive science. The second obstacle is that the separate acts of different people may appear similar yet represent a very different complex of motives in their subjective meaning. Example: five of us agree to a policy in a group discussion. We all say "aye." Similar acts if not the same. Two of us, however, want the policy to work while three of us want it to fail and bring down our boss. The third obstacle is that actors have conflicting motives and the researcher's understanding or interpretation of their subjective meaning cannot assign definite weights to the conflicting drives. In such cases we must wait for and resort to final outcomes before completing the analysis.

In regard to quantification, Weber was clear that for an interpretive science to have causally adequate explanations it must set forth statistical probabilities. It would be dogmatic and arbitrary for an interpretive science to rule out inferential statistics, even though some of us have set as our goal for theory and research, not the lawlike prediction of behavior, but "the anticipation and interpretation of human communicative action."[4]

Weber was equally clear about the misuse of statistical probabilities. No matter how precise the prediction and its probability, without an interpretive understanding of the actors' subjective meaning it would be nothing move than an incomprehensive regularity. Communication researchers in recent years have produced a large pile of incomprehensible regularities.

Let me cite two examples. In the domain of interpersonal communication we have developed two coding systems from the same theoretical base. Interpretations are drawn from theory and imposed on discourse without consulting the actors about the subjective meaning of their verbal acts.[5] We should not be surprised then if the two coding schemes do not agree in their results.[5] We should not be surprised if our subjects do not find themselves reflected in the data. Nor should we be surprised that some communication theorists do not find themselves reflected in the data.

In organizational communication we have the example of network analysis. This example differs from the previous one by not having been derived from a theoretical base. It is a methodological tool. Subjects are asked how frequently and with whom they interact within the organization. Regularities are produced by the computer in the form of networks. The results can fairly be called incomprehensible regularities. Some of the difficulties of this approach could be overcome if at some stage of the research the subjects were invited to talk about the subjective meaning of their interactions. Why are you linked with B and C? More importantly, a researcher should be concerned about weak or non-existent links where the organization chart dictates otherwise. Only the "nodes" can supply the subjective meaning of non-actions as well as actions.

A note about reification is relevant at this point. Weber is well known to have inveighed against the fallacy of misplaced concreteness on the part of the theorist and researcher. He did, however, acknowledge that lay actors do talk and think of organizations as concrete entities and thus have a subjective meaning capable of exerting a powerful causal force on them. An interpetive researcher should be alert to the possibility that an actor has attached the meaning of concreteness to "the organization" in his or her interactions with "it."

II

I hope it is now clear that the interpretive approach is not new. Nor is it easy. The careful listener might have concluded that it is even more difficult than the positivistic, variable-analytic, quantitative brand of research. I hope so. The requirement of Verstehen, the need for tapping the subjective understanding of the subject or actor demands prudence and ingenuity. My own inclination is to ask them. If you doubt the veracity of the answers, negotiate with them.[6] Have them negotiate with each other when it seems appropriate. In the case of unreciprocated links after network analysis, why not show the results to both parties and have them resolve the difference as well as provide an explanatory understanding of their actions?[7]

Research instruments yielding quantifiable data should regularly be employed with interviews, for example, to provide a triangulation of the actions studied. And insights provided by qualitative methods should ultimately be tested quantitatively if one seeks a nomothetic knowledge of organizational communication.

The main advantages of the approach are three:

1. An interpretive approach to organizational communication should keep us meaning-centered, concerned with human action (as opposed to mere motion) in organizations.

2. An interpretive approach to organizational communication should help us avoid the compilation of sterile and incomprehensible regularities.

3. Most important, an interpretive approach to organizational communication should help us more fully exploit the great advantage we enjoy over natural scientists. In the natural sciences one is limited to the formulation of causal uniformities in objects and events. Natural scientists don't "understand" the motion or behavior of rocks and cells; they can only observe the relevant functional relationships. In the study of organizational communication, on the other hand, the objects of analysis themselves have understandings of their actions. By means of the interpretive approach we can rise above the observational "understanding" of the natural sciences. We can rise to the higher level of explanatory understanding by tapping the subjective meaning of the organizational actor.

   Why not ask them?[8]

ENDNOTES

[1]Edited by Linda L. Putnam and Michael E. Pacanowsky (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1983).

[2]Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1978). See Vol. I, pp. 3-62.

[3]This is an extension of the argument advanced by Donald T. Campbell, "Degrees of Freedom and the Case Study," Comparative Political Studies, 8 (1975), 178-193. Also see Robert K. Yin, "The Case Study Crisis: Some Answers," Administrative Science Quarterly, 26 (March 1981), 58-65.

[4]Phillip K. Tompkins and George Cheney, "Account Analysis of Organizations: Decision Making and Identification," in Putnam and Pacanowsky, p. 142.

[5]Nick O'Donnell-Trujillo, "Relational Communication: A Comparison of Coding Systems," Communication Monographs, 48 (June 1981), 91-105.

[6]See Tompkins and Cheney.

[7]This is an idea developed and now being pursued by my colleague at Purdue, Professor Cynthia Stohl.

[8]For those who doubt the reliability of verbal reports, see the long and rigorous review by K. Anders Ericsson and Herbert A. Simon, "Verbal Reports as Data," Psychological Review, 87 (May 1980), 215-251. "In this article we have undertaken to show that verbal reports, elicited with care and interpreted with full understanding of the circumstances under which they were obtained, are a valuable and thoroughly reliable source of information about cognitive processes," p. 247.